

Message Text

PAGE 01 LAHORE 01464 050512Z
ACTION NEA-10

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION AND GENERAL ELECTIONS

REF: ISLAMABAD 12295

1. IN AN APPARENT SHOW OF UNITY, ALL OPPOSITION PARTIES HAVE AGREED IN PRINCIPLE TO PUT UP JOINT CANDIDATES FOR PROVINCIAL AND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SEATS IN UPCOMING GENERAL ELECTIONS. ACCORDING PRESS REPORTS, DECISION WAS REACHED AFTER LENGTHY NEGOTIATIONS IN LAHORE DECEMBER 26 AMONG PROFESSOR GHAFOR AHMAD, SECRETARY GENERAL, UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT (UDF), TEHRIK (TIP) CHIEF AIR MARSHAL ASGHAR KHAN; PAKISTAN JAMHOORI PARTY (PJP) PRESIDENT NAWABZADA NASRULLAH KHAN; AND SENATOR SHAH AHMAD NOORANI, PRESIDENT, JAMIAT-E-ULAMA-PAKISTAN (JUP). DETAILS WILL REPORTEDLY BE WORKED OUT AFTER CENTRAL PARLIAMENTARY BOARD AND HEADS OF UDF CONSTITUENT PARTIES MEET IN FIRST WEEK OF JANUARY. MEANWHILE, TALKS AMONG UDF, TIP AND JUP LEADERS WILL CONTINUE.

2. IN LAHORE MEETING DECEMBER 24-25, CENTRAL ACTION COMMITTEE (CAC) OF UDF CALLED ON ALL MEMBER PARTIES TO
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PAGE 02 LAHORE 01464 050512Z

CONVENE THEIR RESPECTIVE PARLIAMENTARY BOARDS IN PREPARATION FOR SCHEDULE CENTRAL PARLIAMENTARY BOARD GATHERING IN JANUARY. CAC REPORTEDLY RESOLVED THAT ONLY ONE JOINT FRONT CANDIDATE FROM OPPOSITION SHOULD CONTEST IN EACH CONSTITUENCY. USUAL RESOLUTIONS WERE PASSED DEMANDING GOVERNMENT LIFT SECTION 144, RELEASE POLITICAL PRISONERS, DISSOLVE SPECIAL TRIBUNALS, END STATE OF EMERGENCY, ETC. HOWEVER, UDF DROPPED ITS EARLIER DEMAND THAT A NATIONAL

GOVERNMENT BE FORMED TO CARRY OUT ELECTIONS.

3. UDF PRESIDENT PIR OF PAGARO, WHO WAS UNABLE TO ATTEND CAC MEETING, ADDRESSED SUPPORTERS IN HYDERABAD DECEMBER 26, DECLARING DECISION TO PARTICIPATE IN ELECTIONS WILL BE TAKEN AFTER PM HAS ANNOUNCED POLLING DATE. ONLY THEN, HE REPORTEDLY CLAIMED, WILL IT BE POSSIBLE TO SEE IF GOVERNMENT PARTY IS SERIOUS ABOUT HOLDING FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS. PIR, WHO IS ALSO PRESIDENT OF PAKISTAN MUSLIM LEAGUE, CALLED ON LEAGUE WORKERS TO START PREPARING FOR POSSIBLE ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION BY DRAWING UP LIST OF CANDIDATES. IN INTERVIEW WITH NAWA-E-WAQT CORRESPONDENT FOLLOWING DAY, PIR SAID UDF WOULD COOPERATE WITH NON-UDF OPPOSITION PROVIDING THEY ACCEPT UDF MANIFESTO. ALL WERE WELCOME TO JOIN FRONT, INCLUDING TIP AND JUP. HE STRONGLY DENIED RUMORS THAT PML SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT KHAR MIGHT LEAVE PARTY AND REJOIN PPP.

4. SUPPORT FOR OPPOSITION UNITY ALSO CAME FROM SENATOR AND PML CHIEF ORGANIZER HANIF RAMAY. IN A MESSAGE FROM HIS JAIL CELL IN LAHORE HE CALLED ON UDF AND OTHER OPPOSITION PARTIES TO PARTICIPATE IN GENERAL ELECTIONS "BECAUSE THIS WILL STRENGTHEN DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN COUNTRY." ACCORDING PRESS, RAMAY SAID HE WOULD PERSONALLY TRY TO CONTEST EVEN IF HE REMAINS IN JAIL. (HIS CONVICTION UNDER DPR IS CURRENTLY BEING APPEALED, BUT THERE IS LITTLE PROSPECT HE WILL BE OUT BEFORE ELECTION.)

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PAGE 03 LAHORE 01464 050512Z

5. COMMENT: DESPITE FACADE OF UNITY, OPPOSITION APPEARS TO BE AS DIVIDED AS BEFORE. AGREEMENT TO PUT UP JOINT CANDIDATES HAS BEEN REACHED IN PRINCIPLE ONLY, SUBJECT TO APPROVAL OF THE VARIOUS PARTIES. DECISION OF UDF COMMITTEE INDICATES A DUAL POLICY POSITION. PARLIAMENTARY BOARDS ARE BEING CONVENED TO PREPARE LISTS OF CANDIDAKIES. ON OTHER HAND, SHARP DIFFERENCES REMAIN AND SOME ELEMENTS OF UDF WANT TO PRESERVE ELECTION BOYCOTT OPTION. ALL ARE ANXIOUS ABOUT GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO "FREE AND FAIR" ELECTIONS; ONLY TIP AND JUP HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE IN GENERAL ELECTIONS WITHOUT PRECONDITIONS.

6. OTHER PROBLEMS ALSO REMAIN. UDF HAS YET TO BRING OUT ITS NEW MANIFESTO, FOUNDATION AROUND WHICH IT HOPES OPPOSITION UNITY WILL BE BUILT. ROLE OF NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (NDP), SUCCESSOR TO WALI KHAN'S NAP, IS STILL UNCLEAR. UDF WOULD WELCOME NDP PARTICIPATION, BUT SO FAR IT HAS NOT BEEN ABLE TO BRING IT ABOUT. NDP MOST LIKELY WILL STAY OUT OF COMBINED OPPOSITION FRONT UNLESS TIP AND JUP GO IN FIRST. THERE IS ALSO QUESTION OF KHAR'S ROLE. DESPITE PIR OF PAGARO'S DENIAL THAT KHAR MIGHT REJOINING PPP, POSSIBLE DECISION BY KHAR TO DO SO WOULD SHAKE

OPPOSITION. ANOTHER THORNY QUESTION IS SELECTION OF
JOINT CANDIDATES, ALWAYS DIFFICULT IN FRAGILE OPPOSITION
FRONTS. LASTLY, THERE IS PROBLEM OF LEADERSHIP. IN SPITE
OF PERENNIAL OPPOSITION WEAKNESS, LARGE EGOS AMONG LEADER-
SHIP ARE NOT IN SHORT SUPPLY AND CONTEST FOR POSER WILL
BE FIERCE. ALL IN ALL, PROSPECTS FOR PPP HAVE NEVER
LOOKED BETTER.
GAMON

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